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MRS. OXENBRIDGE THACHER — ROBERT FEKE

FLORENCE SCOTT LIBBEY BEQUEST IN MEMORY OF HER FATHER, MAURICE A. SCOTT

THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART
FOUNDED BY EDWARD DRUMMOND LIBBEY

MRS. OXENBRIDGE THACHER BY ROBERT FEKE

A SECOND distinguished work by Feke has been added to the Museum's small collection of colonial American painting through the Florence Scott Libbey bequest. His portrait of Mrs. Oxenbridge Thacher[1] joins the Josiah Martin purchased in 1947 and other portraits of the pre-Revolutionary period by Smibert, Greenwood and Copley.

A century after the death of Robert Feke nothing was remembered of the most accomplished portraitist the Colonies had produced before Copley; the importance of his position in our early artistic history is unquestioned, yet he paradoxically remains an elusive and enigmatic figure whose life is known to us in only the barest details. In 1860 a historical journal published two notes on Feke based on word of mouth family traditions. Despite its lack of confirmation by contemporary evidence this data has been the necessary point of departure for later study. Scholars working since the turn of the century have attributed some seventy pictures to Feke, but diligent search has produced only a handful of concrete facts and dates.[2]

Much speculation has centered about Feke's origins and youth. No record of it exists, but he was probably born about 1705 at Oyster Bay, Long Island, where his father was a Baptist preacher and a property owner of some means whose forebears had come from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. The 1860 account further states that Feke was "several years absent on voyages abroad"—the only supports for this are the 1767 marriage certificates of his two daughters referring to "Robert Feke, Mariner, deceased". If Feke did go to sea as a young man his travels may have brought him into contact with current European fashions in portraiture, and while his own work does show similarities to the London styles of the day, these borrowings could as easily have come from widely-circulated engravings by the leading English artists.

The earliest date definitely associated with Feke the painter is 1741, when he signed and dated a large group portrait (Harvard University) of the wealthy Boston merchant Isaac Royall and his family. In order to receive such an important commission Feke's reputation must have already been established there, but from the date of his marriage record we know that he had settled at Newport, Rhode Island, by 1742. At that time Newport was a leading seaport and commercial rival of Boston, and it was Feke's home for the remaining eight years that we know of him. A traveling Scotch physician, Dr. Alexander Hamilton, visited Feke's studio in 1744 and left in his diary the only known description of the artist: "This man had exactly the phiz of a painter, having a long pale face, sharp nose, large eyes,—with which he looked at you steadfastly,—long curled black hair, a delicate white hand, and long fingers." Feke's presence at Newport in 1745 and in Philadelphia the following year can be proved by dated portraits. On this last trip he may have stopped on Long Island to visit his parents and at the same time have painted our portrait of Josiah Martin and that of his wife (Detroit Institute of Arts) who lived at their nearby estate of Rock Hall.

By 1748 Feke was in Boston again. During that year he painted the famous series of four members of the Bowdoin family (Bowdoin College) as well as portraits of other prominent citizens, among them Oxenbridge Thacher and his wife. Feke's travels took him back to Philadelphia in the spring of 1750, as a John Smith recorded in his diary, "went to Fewke's (sic) the painter's and viewed several pieces and faces of painting." This is the last trace we have of Feke; his fate is surrounded by mystery. Perhaps, as family tradition has it, he died in Bermuda, though there is a stronger argument for Barbados. His death probably took place not long after 1750, as there is no further word of him at Newport where he left his wife and five young children.

Feke's Boston visit of 1748 must have been successful as he stayed on into the following year when he signed the portrait of Mrs. Thacher, his last dated work. Sarah Kent Thacher was born near Boston in 1724. In 1742 she married Oxenbridge Thacher, an eminent lawyer who was, before his death in 1765, an ardent supporter of colonial rights against the crown. Until very recently both Thacher portraits belonged to a descendent of the family living in New York.

The portrait of Mrs. Thacher is among Feke's most vigorous and impressive paintings of women.[3] Dressed in light gray silk trimmed with white muslin and a blue bow she sits before a low wall beyond which appears a few faint trees against the sky. While conforming to the Anglo-American portrait conventions of the time, Feke's portraits were superior to the usual awkward

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1 Acc. No. 53.32; canvas; H. 50 x W. 40 inches. Signed and dated on wall below left arm: R. F. Pinx. 1749.

2 James Wilder Foote's "Robert Feke", Cambridge, Mass., 1930, includes a catalogue of his known paintings and is the most complete discussion of evidence for his career.

3 Foote, pp. 76-77; pp. 191-192.

colonial version of the fashion plate. His figures are distinguished by some sense of plastic form and he learned how to paint the textures of fine fabrics with crisp brushwork and rich paint. Feke managed to endow his sitters with a note of lyric grace and elegance which must have accounted for success in his own lifetime. These qualities still have appeal for us, but Feke's chief distinction from his contemporaries seems to us today to be the more convincing sense of reality which his short career brought to portrait painting in America.

A HISPANO-MORESQUE PLATE

As the Moorish kings were driven from Spain between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, much of their highly developed culture was absorbed by their Christian conquerors. Moorish craftsmen continued their work, and under the new rule no art flourished more splendidly or with greater influence than that of the potter. The term "Hispano-Moresque" is applied to this Spanish pottery which gradually adapted Eastern decorative motifs to Western taste; commonly, it refers to the tin-glazed, luster-decorated ware perfected during the fifteenth century at Valencia.

A large plate of this Valencian ware, especially beautiful for its somberly glowing harmony of purplish-brown luster and deep blue has been recently placed in the gallery of European ceramics.[1] Surrounding the heraldic shield in the center are alternating bands of delicate luster foliage and boldly drawn Arabic inscriptions in blue. These are based on the word *alafia,* meaning 'benediction' or 'peace'. On the reverse a magnificent eagle with wings outspread is displayed against the white tin-glaze.

Our plate is close in style to similar pieces which from their heraldry can be dated to about 1430; probably it was made at Manisses, a suburb of Valencia, where the finest luster ware was produced and exported to all of Europe. In Italy the "blue and gold" ware had a very great influence, stimulating the whole range of painted wares grouped under *maiolica,* the Italian name originally applied to the products of Valencia which were then believed to come from the island of Majorca.

When this plate belonged to the famous Spitzer Collection it was part of a small but choice group of Hispano-Moresque pieces chosen to emphasize this connection with the Italian *maiolica* of the Renaissance.

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1 Acc. No. 54.19; Diam 17¾". Ex Coll: Frederick Spitzer, Paris; Catalogue, 1892, Vol. IV, p. 81, #9, color plate.

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DECEMBER EXHIBITIONS

Edward Drummond Libbey Centenary Exhibition

Marking the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Founder of the Museum, an exhibition has been arranged featuring many of the most important paintings and objects which Mr. Libbey presented to the Museum during his lifetime, as well as outstanding works acquired through his endowment and bequest.

19th Century American Painters, 1815-1865

Fifty-one pictures, lent by the pioneer collector Maxim Karolik, represent landscape, genre, portrait and still-life paintings, reflecting the sentiments, pleasures, and adventures of an earlier America.

Paintings by Anna Louise Thorne—Weaving by Marie Walters

Opening Sunday, December 12, one of the season's most unusual Gallery 8 exhibitions will show the work of Miss Thorne, who, at the age of 88 is one of the area's prominent artists. A retrospective group of her work will be included as well as her most recent canvases done in California. Miss Walters, a resident of Adrian, Michigan, was an award winner in the 1954 annual Toledo Area Artists show.

OPENING JANUARY 2 DUTCH PAINTING—THE GOLDEN AGE

An exhibition of one hundred world-famous pictures by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, Ruisdael, Metsu, Cuyp, deHooch, Steen, and others.